

Urban Life

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The Earliest Cities

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This chapter examines the nature and diversity of ancient urban centers around the globe. Archaeologists have drawn on the work of Wirth, Sjoberg, and other scholars to reconstruct life and conditions in the earliest cities. In spite of great diversity in the forms and functions of ancient cities between and within regions, early cities share a number of traits with historical and modern cities.

For 99 percent of the history of humans on earth, there were no cities. Our ancestors lived for thousands of years in temporary campsites or small villages. These communities were well suited to the small-scale, simple societies of ancient times, and most people who lived in them probably could not have imagined what a city was. During the past five thousand years, however, cities have become important parts of the social landscape in many parts of the world. Once complex societies evolved in a region, the appearance of cities was inevitable. The emergence of state-level societies out of the simple farming societies known as tribes and chiefdoms was one of the most fundamental and far-reaching social transformations of the human path, and the rise of the earliest cities was a crucial part of this process.

Tribal society operated on a small scale. Everyone knew one another, and no single family stood out as more wealthy or powerful than the others. The economy was simple and very generalized—each family obtained its own food, built its own house, and made its own tools. Political leaders had no real power, and people had a high degree of freedom to pursue their own interests. Ancient states, on the other hand, were far larger and more com-

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plicated than tribes or chiefdoms. There were many thousands of people in each state, many of whom were strangers to one another. Occupational specialization was advanced, and diverse categories of people worked together in a complex division of labor. Society was sharply divided into social classes, typically a small elite that controlled society and a much larger class of peasants and other commoners. At the top of the hierarchy was a king who wielded real political and military power. People had less freedom, since they had to obey laws, and most commoners had to work longer hours than their tribal cousins in order to pay taxes to their king or local lord.

The transition from tribal to state-level society occurred independently in several parts of the world after 3000 B.C. One of the most visible aspects of this transition was the establishment of the earliest cities in each region. Cities are only found in state-level societies. The reason for this is simple—cities fulfill important roles in the large-scale and complex societies of states. Cities are the places where the personnel and institutions of government, the economy, and religion are concentrated. Simpler societies were not large or complicated enough to require cities, and people preferred living in their traditional hamlets and villages.

The nature and form of a city, whether ancient or modern, is closely related to its wider social and cultural context. Just as early states around the world differed greatly in their social institutions and cultural patterns, so too did their cities differ. For example, the earliest cities in Mesopotamia were compact, densely packed settlements surrounded by walls. There are two reasons for these features: first, cities were often at war with one another (defense was an important consideration in urban design), and cities were located in zones of irrigation agriculture in a desert setting (farmland was valuable and in short supply, so cities tended to be small in area to avoid covering agricultural fields). The earliest cities of the Maya in Mesoamerica, on the other hand, were sprawling settlements whose houses blended into the tropical forest. Defensive walls were not needed in this society, and people farmed large garden plots within the bounds of the city.

Ancient cities varied not only by culture, but also within a single culture. Most ancient states had more than one type of city, depending upon the nature of urban activities and the role of cities in their regions. The Aztecs of central Mexico, for example, had at least three types of urban settlement: a large, densely populated imperial capital with a heavy focus on economic activity and the administration of the empire; numerous smaller city-state capitals that emphasized religion and local administration; and a few special-purpose cities dedicated to particular crafts and cults. This variation in ancient cities—both within and between cultures—is one of the most notable features of the earliest cities. This is not to deny that ancient cities shared many characteristics. In a number of ways, ancient cities (and more recent preindustrial cities) can be distinguished from the cities of modern industrialized nations (see Sjöberg, this volume). On the other hand, many features we associate with modern urbanism had their origin in the earliest cities.

DEFINITIONS OF THE CITY

Archaeologists and historians who study ancient cities have taken several approaches to the definition of cities and urbanism. This is an important issue, since it affects the way we interpret ancient urban centers and their significance. The two most common approaches can be called the demographic and the functional definitions. The *demographic definition* of a city is closest to many Western people's intuitive notion of urbanism. It is stated most clearly in Louis Wirth's classic article, "Urbanism As a Way of Life" (see Wirth, this volume): "For sociological purposes a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals." In other words, cities have large populations living in a compact area, and they have various institutions and patterns of social complexity, such as social classes, economic specialists, ethnic groups, and diverse religions. From this perspective, the settlements of the ancient Mayan or Egyptian civilizations cannot be called cities, since their populations were too small and too dispersed.

The *functional definition* of urbanism downplays the role of population size in defining a city and focuses instead on the role(s) that a settlement plays within its regional context. An urban settlement is one that is the setting for institutions or activities that are important for a larger hinterland. In this view, one must look beyond the settlement itself and assess its role in the larger society to decide whether it is an urban settlement. There are a variety of urban functions that cities can perform, including political functions (such as the location of the palace or seat of political administration), economic functions (the location of craft workshops, markets, warehouses, or other economic institutions), religious functions (a setting for major temples or a pilgrimage center), and cultural functions (a center for artistic production, education, or recreation).

In state-level societies, key institutions and activities tend to be concentrated in a small number of places, and those are the settlements classified as urban from the functional perspective. Although settlements with many urban functions tend to attract people and have large populations, this is not always the case, and thus population size and density are not part of the functional definition of cities. The dispersed jungle settlements of the Maya were clearly cities in a functional sense, even if they appear not to be cities in a demographic sense. One advantage of the functional approach is that it allows for different types of city (economic centers, political centers, etc.) and different levels of urban settlement. Urban settlements with a large and diverse set of urban functions are typically called cities, while smaller urban settlements with fewer urban functions are called towns. The demographic approach can be ethnocentric in that it assumes cities in all cultures will resemble the large and densely settled cities of the modern United States and Europe (see Sjöberg, this volume, for a critique of this notion). I follow the functional approach to ancient cities and urbanism in this article, and use it to emphasize the diversity of ancient cities.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANCIENT CITIES

In spite of the fact that the earliest writing systems developed at the same time as the earliest cities in most parts of the world, archaeological excavations are our best source of information on the nature of the earliest cities. Early written texts typically focused on a limited range of topics (such as the glory of the royal dynasty, tax records, or religious rituals), and descriptions of urban settlements was not one of them. In contrast, the study of ancient cities has been a subject of major interest among archaeologists for over a century. The earliest archaeologists were attracted to the largest and most impressive sites, and these were usually urban settlements. The goals and methods of archaeology have changed considerably since the 1840s, when Henry Layard dug the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and John Lloyd Stevens first described ancient Mayan ruins such as Copán and Palenque. The early archaeologists were interested in uncovering the largest and most grandiose architecture and in finding the finest collections of ancient art objects to bring home to European and American museums.

Today, archaeologists have expanded their focus to the less spectacular residential zones of cities and the rural hinterlands, and their goals involve reconstructing urban activities and conditions. The lives of ancient urbanites are now a primary interest. Important buildings are often restored for visitors to see, and the artifacts that are recovered are typically placed in local museums rather than taken out of their country of origin.

Cities were present in nearly all ancient complex societies, and there is not space here to review all of the known examples around the world. The following section covers four of the better-known early urban traditions of the Old World to give an idea of the nature and variation of ancient cities between cultures. Since ancient cities also varied greatly within a single urban tradition, the section on the Old World is followed by one that focuses on the cities of ancient Mesoamerica to examine the variety of urban forms within one culture area in greater detail.

FOUR ANCIENT URBAN TRADITIONS OF THE OLD WORLD

Uruk: The Earliest City

Not surprisingly, the first cities in the world were built by the Sumerians, the people who forged the earliest state-level society in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers known as Mesopotamia. During the Uruk period (3600–3100 B.C.), the institutions of complex society—such as writing, centralized political control, a specialized economy, and class stratification—were evolving. Population was growing and many new settlements were founded. Most of these were small farming villages and hamlets. Uruk was the largest settlement, and by the end of this period it covered three-quarters of a square kilometer and had a population of several thousand. The transition to the Early Dynastic period (2900–2300 B.C.) saw enormous growth at

Uruk, which expanded to cover four square kilometers with a population of about fifty thousand people. This explosion of urbanization was accompanied by the near abandonment of the surrounding countryside. People gave up their homes in isolated villages and moved into the city, the earliest example of rural-to-urban migration. There are two likely explanations for this change, both related to the social and political context of Sumerian society.

This was the time when kings first appeared in Sumeria. We know from later history that when a state-level society takes over and tries to control peoples who are not used to obeying kings and rulers (i.e., tribal and other nonstate peoples), a common practice is to force people to live in towns and cities where they can be watched and controlled more easily than if they live scattered across the landscape. The first kings of Uruk may have felt they needed to have their subjects close at hand, living in the city near the palace. The second explanation for the rapid migration of farmers into the city is warfare. Uruk was not the only place with a king and state-level institutions. The entire area of Sumeria was filled with numerous small city-states, each with a king who ruled over the central town or city and its surrounding agricultural hinterland. These kings raised armies and fought with one another. The battles are described in early written texts, and one effect of the near-constant warfare was the construction of defensive walls around cities. Life in unprotected villages and hamlets became too dangerous, and people moved into Uruk and other cities for protection against invading armies.

Uruk illustrates two points about early urbanism. First, the larger social context of a society helps explain both the rise of cities and the nature and form of cities in that society. In the Sumerian case, we have pointed to the expression of political control by early kings and the prevalence of warfare as factors leading to the rise of Uruk. Other small urban centers quickly developed, each the capital of a city-state. These cities grew quickly without much evidence of central planning. Because there were many small city-states, none of which managed to forge a large empire, Sumerian cities remained relatively small settlements. Second, urbanism is a regional phenomenon, and cities cannot be understood without reference to their larger hinterland. Uruk and other early Sumerian cities fulfilled not only political and military functions, however, but also economic and religious functions. These small cities were centers for craft production for their city-state and they contained temples where the entire city-state population worshipped the gods.

Mohenjo-Daro of the Indus Valley Civilization

The cities of the Indus Valley civilization, which flourished in Pakistan and western India, offer a contrast to Uruk and the other Sumerian cities. We know far less about this society because only a few sites have been excavated and the Indus Valley writing system has not yet been deciphered. Nevertheless, the Indus Valley cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro are among the most impressive urban centers of the ancient world. The Early Indus

period (2800–2300 B.C.) saw the development of a number of walled towns. These small settlements (less than one-quarter square kilometer) housed craft specialists and traders, and the walls suggest that warfare was common. Not much else is known about this time period. The following Mature Indus period (2300–1750 B.C.) was the time when huge cities were built.

Mohenjo-Daro covered about two and one-half square kilometers with a population of about forty thousand people, and Harappa was slightly smaller, at one and one-half square kilometers and twenty-five thousand inhabitants. These cities differed from the early Sumerian cities not only in their size, but also in the extent of urban planning and the presence of impressive public buildings. Mohenjo-Daro was dominated by a huge raised platform or acropolis built of fired brick known as the Citadel. It supported a number of impressive public buildings, carefully constructed with high-quality architecture and materials. There are great assembly halls and a large pool called the Great Bath that was probably used for some kind of ritual of purification. Outside the Citadel were the brick houses of the urban dwellers. Sanitation was highly developed, and most houses had water wells and bathrooms with drains. The streets also had drains.

The Indus Valley cities were carefully planned and all buildings followed a strict grid orientation that ran north-south and east-west. The cities were divided into individual sectors surrounded by walls and entered through formal gateways. We know from later history that kings who built carefully planned capitals were usually trying to achieve two ends. First, they wanted to achieve a correspondence between the ordered heavens above and their capital city on earth. These ancient capitals, whether in the Indus Valley, Mexico, or China, were sacred cities designed to mimic the cosmic world and impress the gods. Second, rulers who planned cities with regular street patterns were also trying to impress their subjects here on earth with the power and grandeur of the king and capital.

Although we know very little about the nature of rulership or government in the Indus Valley civilization, the large-scale architecture and extensive planning of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa give us clues to the goals of their ancient kings. It takes a powerful ruler to command all of the labor and materials required to build these huge cities with large public buildings. It also takes a powerful ruler to achieve a well-planned city whose buildings all shared a common grid alignment. Perhaps when the Indus Valley writing system is deciphered we will find out the names of these kings and something about their reigns. In the meantime, archaeological excavations have provided us with a graphic illustration of their deeds.

The Sacred Khmer City of Angkor in Ancient Cambodia

The kings of early state-level societies in Southeast Asia carried the notion of the sacred city to its greatest development. When they combined the idea of the city as a replica of the cosmos with the concept that the king is

a god on earth who must be worshipped, the result was a tradition of spectacular temple-cities rising out of the Cambodian jungle. King Jayavarman II in A.D. 802 was the first Khmer king to declare himself a god to be worshipped. He and his successors dedicated their reigns to warfare and temple building.

Khmer cities were laid out around square temple complexes, each one focused on a central series of towers leading up to a highest tower or pinnacle in the exact center. These complexes were designed as models of the universe, and the highest tower represented the sacred Mount Meru, home of the gods. As the Khmer kings continued their conquests to expand the empire, new and larger temple complexes were built. King Suryavarman II, who ruled from 1113 to 1150, was one of the most powerful kings and built the huge complex called Angkor Wat (Figure 1). By then, Khmer influence had spread throughout Southeast Asia, from Burma to the China Sea. The Angkor Wat compound, which covers nearly two square kilometers, is the largest religious building in the world. The central tower rises to over sixty meters in height. The various towers, rooms, causeways, pools, and gates were built with great precision using measurements based on sacred combinations of numbers. Hundreds of sculptures of gods, people, and scenes from daily life decorate the temple compound, which is surrounded by a moat 250 meters wide. Waterworks were also built for more practical ends, including many large reservoirs and canals for irrigation agriculture. Irrigated farming was highly productive and formed the economic backbone that supported the elaborate and costly construction programs of the Khmer kings.



Figure 1

Temple of Angkor Wat at the Khmer city of Angkor. [Photo reproduced with permission from the Harry Elbaum Collection, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies]

The death of Suryavarman II was followed by a period of unrest and destruction until King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220) came to power. He reestablished order in the empire and then constructed Angkor Thom, a walled compound even larger than Angkor Wat. Angkor Thom is a walled city of ten square kilometers within the larger imperial capital. It includes a huge sacred-mountain temple compound called the Bayon in the center plus a large, walled royal palace; smaller temples, moats, and reservoirs; and places for thousands of priests, servants, and slaves to live. The remainder of the urban population lived in the area surrounding these great compounds, but the residential areas have not yet been studied extensively.

Recent indigenous states of Southeast Asia have been called “theater states” because of the reliance of their rulers on pomp and ceremony. This pattern goes back to the Khmer empire, whose spectacular capital Angkor was one of the true wonders of the ancient world. Angkor is an example of a type of preindustrial city that has been called the “regal-ritual city” by Richard Fox (1977). Regal-ritual cities had their major urban functions in the realms of politics and religion. They were organized around the royal palace and major state temples. The huge size and aesthetic elaboration of the religious and royal compounds at Angkor provide lasting material evidence for the fusion of politics and religion, a pattern that is found in many ancient civilizations.

Egypt in the Old Kingdom: Civilization without Cities?

The Old Kingdom (2680–2134 B.C.) was a time of powerful and highly centralized state government in Egypt. Pharaohs controlled a vast territory along the Nile River, which they ruled through an extensive bureaucracy of scribes who recorded all sorts of economic and social information for the king. The Pharaoh was a divine king, believed to be the son of Ra, the sun god. Pharaohs were buried in large tombs, which through time evolved into the pyramids for which the Old Kingdom is famous. The pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty kings, built between 2650 and 2500 B.C., are some of the largest monuments of the ancient world and stand as enduring testimony of the power and grandeur of their inhabitants.

In comparison with other ancient civilizations, Egypt’s lack of large urban centers stands out. This is especially unusual given the high degree of political control exerted by the Pharaohs; powerful and centralized ancient states like this almost always had large capital cities. Indeed, Egypt has often been called a “civilization without cities.” But this title makes sense only if one follows the demographic definition of cities discussed earlier. There were simply no large urban settlements with tens of thousands of inhabitants before the New Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.), when the heretic Pharaoh Akhenaton built a new imperial capital at Amarna (which qualifies as a city under just about any definition). On the other hand, the functional approach to urbanism suggests that Old Kingdom Egypt did indeed have urban settle-

ments. These were towns that had important urban functions, even though they lacked large resident populations.

As the Egyptian state grew in power at the start of the Old Kingdom period, walls were built around many settlements in the Nile Valley. These towns became the administrative centers of the Pharaoh’s government. Each included a major temple, some workshops, and living quarters for priests, scribes, and other people who worked for the temple or for the state, all surrounded by walls of mud brick. Unlike urban centers in many other ancient cultures, farmers did not live in these towns. The walls were not for defense against enemies, as at Uruk in Sumeria, since warfare was not a problem in the well-ordered world of Old Kingdom Egypt. Instead, the walls served a symbolic purpose in demarcating the boundaries of the town. Old Kingdom walled towns covered less than one square kilometer, and their resident population was only a few thousand. The primary urban functions of these towns were administrative and religious, just as in regal-ritual cities, but their role was at the lower end of the scales of government and religion. The Pharaoh did not live in the walled administrative towns, only his scribes and other officials. The temples housed important deities and cults, but these were not the central cults of the Egyptian state.

The royal capital of Old Kingdom Egypt was Memphis. Unfortunately, little of the city survives today, and most of our information comes from texts and inscriptions. Although it is possible that Memphis was a large urban center with a major population, it is more likely that it was just a larger version of the walled administrative towns. There was considerable monumental architecture in the royal palace and state temples, and there must have been quarters for numerous priests, scribes, servants, and other workers. Nevertheless, most commoners—farmers and craftspersons—lived in their individual villages, not in town.

Old Kingdom Egypt demonstrates that it is possible to have a powerful and extensive kingdom without having large, populous cities. Defense was not a problem in the Old Kingdom, so people did not have to live tightly packed behind walls. Another reason that large cities were not needed was the nature of Egyptian government, one of the most bureaucratic polities of all time. The government was run by thousands of scribes, who kept close written records of peoples, goods, foods, and activities. Scribes traveled widely and visited all parts of the kingdom. Through their work the Pharaoh and his officials could keep track of people even when they lived scattered in many small villages.

THE MESOAMERICAN URBAN TRADITION

Mesoamerica is a culture area covering central and southern Mexico and northern Central America. It was home to a wide diversity of peoples and cultures, of whom the Maya and Aztecs are the best known. The Mesoamerican urban tradition began with the earliest towns and cities

around the time of Christ. In the following Classic period (A.D. 100–800), complex urban civilizations flourished in the tropical jungle lowlands of southern Mesoamerica (the Maya) and in the temperate highlands (e.g., Teotihuacan near Mexico City and Monte Albán in the state of Oaxaca). The Postclassic period (A.D. 800–1520) was a time of change and growth throughout Mesoamerica, with general trends leading to groups of smaller states and more widespread interaction between regions, including commercial exchange and the spread of ideas and information. The ancient cities and towns of Mesoamerica varied greatly in their size, social composition, economic institutions, administrative role, and religious institutions. Nevertheless, a basic pattern of urban planning was found in most cities and towns.

Size

In most regions of Mesoamerica, a single city stood out as much larger than all others; this is referred to as a primate city-size pattern. For example, among the Classic period Maya, the powerful capital Tikal had a population of forty to sixty thousand, whereas most centers had fewer than eight thousand inhabitants. This situation was typical of many of the best-known Mesoamerican cities, including Chichén Itzá, Monte Albán, Xochicalco, Teotihuacan, and Tenochtitlan. These large primate cities were not at all typical of the sizes of urban centers in their region, most of which were much smaller. Aztec society in central Mexico is a good example. Tenochtitlan, a huge metropolis that was capital of the Aztec empire, stood out with two hundred thousand inhabitants, but the average population of city-state capitals (the most common Aztec urban form) was nine thousand persons.

Just as Mesoamerican cities varied greatly in their number of inhabitants, they also varied widely in their population densities (number of inhabitants per square kilometer). Tenochtitlan, a grid-plan city built on land reclaimed from a swamp, had one of the densest populations (15,000/sq km). Most central Mexican cities, including Teotihuacan, Tula, and Aztec non-imperial cities, were less dense (between 5,000–7,500/sq km). In contrast, the inhabitants of Classic Maya cities in the Petén were far more dispersed; Tikal's population density was around 500/persons per square kilometer (Figure 2).

Social Composition

Cities were settlements with diverse social compositions. Representatives of most of the social categories that existed in any Mesoamerican civilization could be found in its urban settlements. Mesoamerican civilizations exhibited class stratification, and their cities contained the residences of both elites and commoners. Kings usually had their major residence in a capital city, and other members of the elite typically lived there too. In some cities, elite residences were concentrated in the downtown area, whereas in other cases the houses of the wealthy were more widely dispersed through-

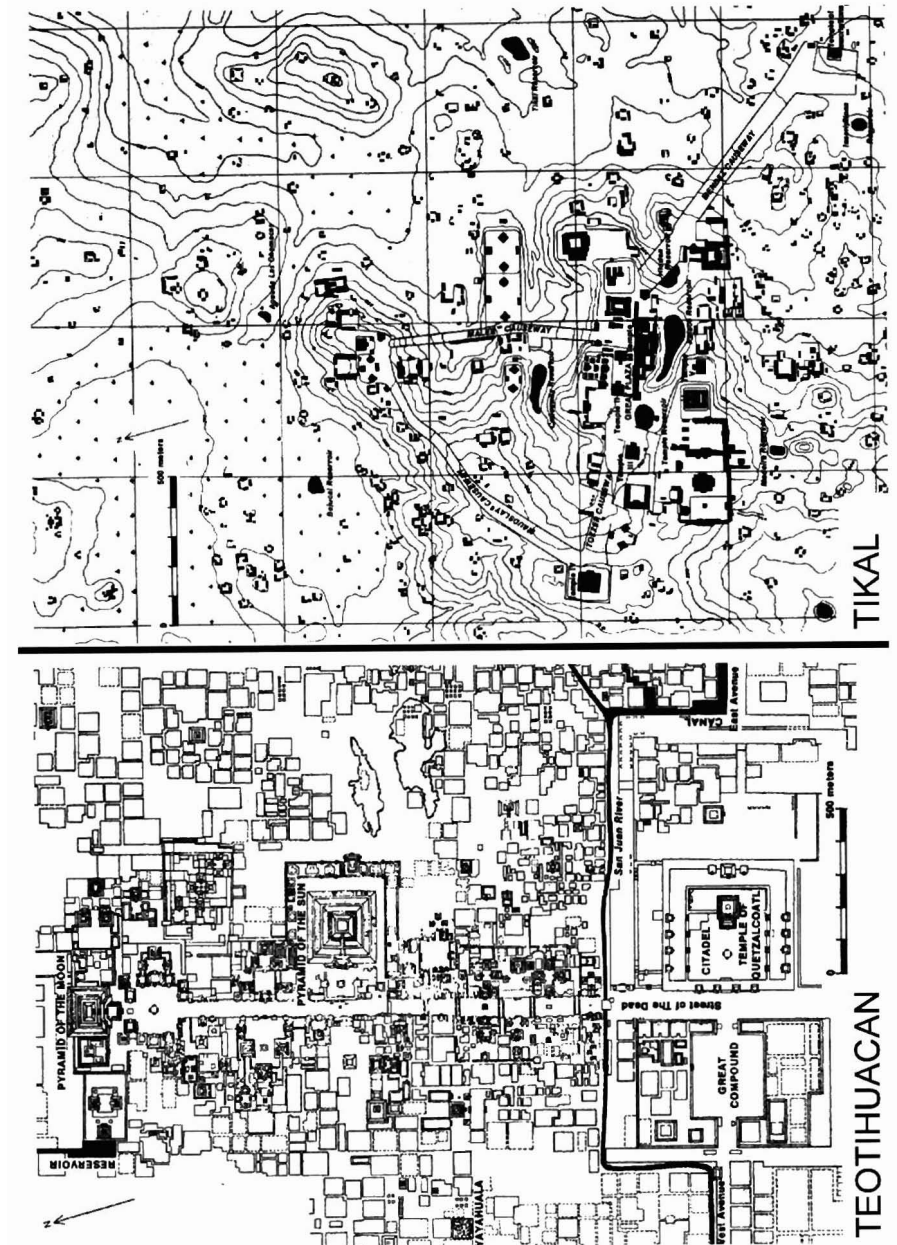


Figure 2

Comparison of the central areas of two Mesoamerican capitals: Tikal (right) and Teotihuacan (left). The maps are at the same scale; the Tikal grid squares are 500 meters on a side. [Figure adapted from figures 7 and 8 of *Mesoamerica: The Evolution of a Civilization*, by William T. Sanders and Barbara J. Price, Random House, 1968]

out the city. Elites were not necessarily limited to cities, however; rural elite compounds have been identified among both the Aztec and the Maya.

The bulk of the urban population were commoners, and in most cases these urbanites were farmers, cultivating urban garden plots and/or exterior fields. Teotihuacan, a large city with many resident farmers, shows an interesting parallel with the Sumerian city of Uruk. Its major period of growth came from the movement of rural peoples into the city and the abandonment of large parts of the hinterland. Because cities were centers for economic, political, and religious activities, many occupational specialists were urbanites. Artisans, merchants, bureaucrats, scribes, priests, and other specialists were found in most Mesoamerican cities, although in varying numbers depending on the size of the city and its functional orientation. Many Mesoamerican cities also contained more than one ethnic group.

Economic Institutions

Mesoamerican cities varied widely in the degree and nature of urban economic activities. Some cities and towns had large-scale craft industries; for example the Mayan town of Colha was a center for the production of stone tools, and Teotihuacan had numerous crafts, including obsidian tools, ceramic vessels, jewelry, and other goods. Nevertheless, large-scale production was the exception rather than the rule. Craft specialization in Mesoamerica was more typically organized at the level of the household, and specialists, both full-time and part-time, worked out of their homes. The extent to which goods were manufactured in urban versus rural locations is currently a topic of research and debate. It appears that many Mesoamerican cities, including those of the Classic Maya, witnessed only limited production of utilitarian goods, whereas artisans producing luxury items for the elite were more common. On the other hand, extensive utilitarian craft specialization took place in some cities, such as Tenochtitlan, Otumba, and Teotihuacan. In these cities, specialists tended to be clustered together in wards or neighborhoods. At the time of Spanish conquest (A.D. 1519), marketplaces were prominent features in most Mesoamerican cities, reflecting the importance of commerce at that time. Cities were the focal points of Mesoamerican long-distance exchange networks, whether the exchange was commercially oriented, state controlled, or organized in some other fashion.

One interesting feature of Mesoamerican cities is that many of the residents were farmers. In large, densely populated cities such as Teotihuacan, urban farmers had to walk out to their fields beyond the city each day. In other, less densely settled cities, commoners cultivated gardens and fields inside the city itself. This is probably a major reason for the very low population density in Tikal and other Mayan cities (see Figure 2). Research at some Mayan sites has uncovered chemical evidence of fertilizer use in intensive garden plots adjacent to residences, and agricultural terraces are found within Aztec towns located in hilly settings. In spite of the presence of farm-

ing within their boundaries, these settlements are considered “urban” in the functional perspective if they were the setting for central activities and institutions for a larger area.

Administrative Role

Most Mesoamerican cities were political capitals. Royal palaces were typically among the largest buildings in a city (along with temples), and they were the setting not only for administration and rule but also for economic, religious, and social activities. The palace was usually at the center of the city and its size and grandeur proclaimed the greatness and power of the ruler. Indigenous views of the nature of cities, as reconstructed from Aztec texts, emphasized the royal palace as the key institution, the presence of which qualified a settlement as a city.

This emphasis on the grandeur of the palace and the greatness of the ruler was not found in all Mesoamerican cities, however; Teotihuacan was a notable exception. There is no obvious palace at the site, and individual rulers were not glorified as they were among the Maya and many other Mesoamerican cultures. Although the government of Teotihuacan was different from most Mesoamerican states, its rulers were able to control a powerful empire in central Mexico. Another political role of some cities was their function as fortresses. This was most common during periods of warfare and balkanization (such as after the fall of Teotihuacan in central Mexico) and along the boundaries of empires (such as the Aztec/Tarascan imperial frontier). In these cases, cities were often located on defensible hill-tops, ringed with walls and ditches.

Religious Institutions

The most impressive buildings in Mesoamerican cities were the pyramid-temples of the state religion. The largest of these monuments were usually located in the center of the city (Figure 3), near the royal palace, and in most cities many additional smaller pyramids could be found throughout the urban zone. A variety of rituals and ceremonies were conducted by priests at the temples, including human sacrifices. Pyramid-temples were usually associated with open public plazas that were used in public ceremonies, either for ritual acts or for crowds to gather to watch ceremonies atop the pyramids. Ballcourts were another form of urban religious architecture found in many cities (the Mesoamerican ballgame was part ritual and part sport). The Aztecs and other cultures at the time of Spanish conquest had professional priests who lived in religious compounds near temples. Mesoamerican priests engaged in astronomical observations, and the knowledge gained from this activity was put to work in the placement and orientation of buildings and even whole cities. This was done by rulers to achieve a harmony between their city and the cosmos, and it illustrates the close links that existed between politics and religion in ancient Mesoamerica.

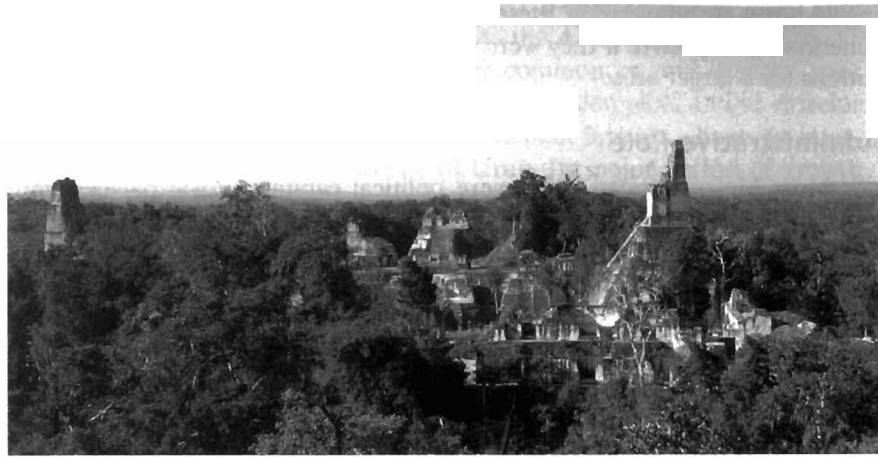


Figure 3

Temple 1 and other large buildings in the central area of Tikal. [Photo by Michael E. Smith]

Urban centers were sacred places, and in addition to conducting ceremonies at the temples and in their compounds, priests often walked in processions throughout the city and conducted rituals at various shrines and holy places (such as caves) both within and outside of cities. The commoners in Mesoamerican cities also conducted their own rituals in their homes.

Urban Planning

An ancient and fundamental pattern of urban planning guided the layout of most Mesoamerican cities and towns. The central areas were carefully planned and laid out according to religious and political principles, whereas the surrounding residential zones were unplanned and lacked an overall organizing theme. The pyramids, palaces, ballcourts, and plazas found in the urban core were integrated into a coherent architectural and spatial unit through a combination of common compass orientations and the use of walls and passageways. This arrangement was often dictated by religious ideas, both astronomical and mythological. The imposing Templo Mayor pyramid at the center of Aztec Tenochtitlan (modern Mexico City), for example, was aligned with the course of the sun across the sky and was viewed as an architectural manifestation of a sacred place from Aztec mythology.

The central ceremonial plazas of most cities were large open spaces flanked by tall pyramids. When people gathered in the plaza to witness ceremonies or for other business, they could not help but be impressed by the monumental buildings that towered over the plaza. This pyramid-plaza arrangement, replicated on a smaller scale in other parts of the city, was a component of urban planning whose political message accompanied its overt

religious symbolism. The central urban zone showed off the magnificence of the city's ruler and elites, and the massed architecture was a material manifestation of their power and control over the labor of their subjects. Outside of the central urban core, the residential zones in Mesoamerican cities generally lacked overall planning and organization. Houses were often built in compounds or patio groups, but the locations and layout of these groups does not appear to have been coordinated.

Although this pattern of urban planning was widespread in Mesoamerica, not all cities conformed to it. One alternative arrangement was the central Mexican imperial capital pattern. Teotihuacan, the first large city and the earliest imperial capital in highland central Mexico, shows a high degree of centralized planning over the entire city. All buildings followed a common grid (much like Mohenjo-Daro) that was aligned with a central ceremonial avenue, the "Street of the Dead" (Figures 2 and 4). The grid was established early in the city's history as a symbol of power by the city's rulers. The economic and symbolic influences of Teotihuacan were felt throughout Mesoamerica, and the city was probably known by the term Tollan (place of reeds), a label meaning sacred metropolis. The later Toltec rulers of Tula adopted the label Tollan for their city, and they established a grid layout modeled after Teotihuacan. When the Aztecs came to power in the fifteenth century, they transformed Tenochtitlan from a small island city into an imperial capital by establishing a regular grid pattern based upon their knowledge



Figure 4

Aerial view of Teotihuacan. [Photo reproduced with permission of the Compañía Mexicana de Aerofoto]

of the ancient capitals Teotihuacan and Tula. One Aztec king even sent people to study those ancient cities. These three large urban centers exhibited a distinctive pattern of urban planning that was a modification of the older Mesoamerican principles described earlier.

LESSONS FROM THE EARLIEST CITIES

Two themes stand out from the cases reviewed in the previous sections. First, there was considerable variation among ancient cities. All of these cities differed greatly from the modern industrial cities of the West (see Sjoberg, this volume), but they also differed greatly among themselves. In the review of Old World cities, we focused on variation between cultures, or between urban traditions. Egyptian administrative towns, Khmer sacred capitals, Indus Valley planned cities, and Sumerian walled capitals were all very different types of urban settlements. So were ancient cities in other areas, such as China, Africa, and South America. In the section on Mesoamerica, we focused more on variation within a single urban tradition. Not only were Mayan cities very different from Aztec cities, but there were different types and forms of urban centers within each of these two civilizations.

The second theme of the case studies is that cities and towns must be viewed within their wider social and cultural context. The forms and functions of urban settlements are to a large extent determined by the nature of the wider society. To understand ancient cities we need to know the answers to questions such as: was this an empire or a city-state society? was the king considered a god? how was commerce organized? was warfare a problem? did farmers live out among their fields or clustered together in towns? Since urban settlements performed specific functions for their hinterlands, our view of ancient cities needs to take into account their specific geographical regions and settings.

Many features of modern urban life described in the other articles of this reader originated in the earliest cities. Ancient cities grew through migration from the countryside. Early cities were unhealthy places with high mortality rates (see Schell, this volume), and they required a steady influx of new migrants just to maintain their populations. Just as in modern cities, urban immigrants to ancient cities often maintained social ties to their villages of origin, reinforcing a close interaction between city and countryside. Ancient cities were settings for considerable social and cultural diversity. Both elites and commoners lived in cities, and many commoners lived in poverty. Many or most ancient cities had multiple ethnic groups and occupational groups, often organized into neighborhoods. Many urban dwellers were strangers to one another. By taking these earliest cities into account, we gain some perspective on the variety of urban settings in the modern world.

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